

# Virtual tours in the opinion of the users of social networking sites in Poland and Belarus

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## Abstract

The article presents the results of a research related to the analysis of the level of knowledge of the virtual tours phenomenon (called Virtual Tourism - VT) and its use in the planning of individual tourist activity by respondents in Poland and Belarus. The possibility of replacing actual tourist trips by VT was also analyzed. Respondents (n=150) were the users of the most popular social networking site in Poland – Facebook and its Russian-language counterpart – VKontakte. The research tool was a questionnaire which was distributed through viral marketing. The obtained results allow the authors to conclude that VT is used by the respondents to plan individual tourism activity; however, even in the case of poor people, it is not an alternative to actual travel.

## Keywords

virtual tourism, users of social networking sites, Poland, Belarus, tourist activity

## **Introduction**

This work undertakes the issue of assessing the knowledge and use of the phenomenon of virtual tourism by the Polish and Belarusian users of social networking sites in the planning of individual tourism activity. The analysis of impact of financial societies welfare on the level of their interest and tools usage of virtual tourism was a main aim of the work. The Polish and Belorussian internet users were compared and analyzed for this purpose.

The article consists of six main parts. The literature overview leads to a research hypothesis and objectives of the work which are the basis of research methods. Using the presented results the authors conducted discussion and shows conclusion of the study.

### **1. Literature overview**

Virtual tourism (VT) is associated with the use of the contemporary Internet capabilities and the consumption of tourist space expressed in a digital way. This space, in relation to an entity (i.e., tourist, actually an Internet tourist - e-tourist - ed. Author), is determined by Włodarczyk (2007) as unreal space, but theoretically possible to come into existence or existing, but not in a particular place (i.e., place of residence of an e-tourist) and time. This unreality or non-existence relate to both the existing and fully mapped locations, although, with the addition of foreign elements (e.g., objects created after the digitalization of the image of a particular area). The possibility of a virtual journey within the contemporary reception areas is provided, among others, by Google Street View (GSV), (Google Street View, <http://maps.google.pl>).

Hu et al. (2012) perceive VT as an economically friendly and safe tourism activity element of modern man. The advantage of VT is the fact that the consumer (i.e., e-tourist) can freely choose and customize his needs, related to the consumption of tourist assets, to the extent to which it was not possible until now (Williams and Hobson 1995).

Virtual tourism may also be an alternative for people with disabilities or patients who alone are not able to make the effort associated with the tourist activity, in discovering the tourism resources around the globe. Some authors, including Ritzer (1998), suggest that VT poses a real threat to the conventional tourism activity of man, because providing a substitute for the "real presence" in a specific place, it can also discourage taking an effort and executing the actual journey. However, the latest

research results (e.g. Hu et al., 2012) suggest that virtual tourism, due to not fully meeting the tourism needs, can only be complementary to the actual trip.

There are three basic types of web objects, which allow the virtual tourism. They are (Virtual Tours, <http://www.virtuar.com>):

- virtual tours and 360° panoramas, including panoramic views of places such as those related to cultural and natural heritage;
- galleries of static photographs, which are part of the contents of websites;
- Internet applications based on software similar to computer games, where the Internet user, by means of, e.g., an avatar, moves in the virtual world.

Not without significance is also the perception of virtual tourism as a digital presentation of actual places, in which the geometric properties of three-dimensional space are communicated to the recipient in such a way that it can be the impression of a real stay. Virtual tourism in such a context cannot exist without virtual reality (VR) and space (Virtual Environment - VE). Burdea and Coiffet (2004) define virtual reality as a way to use computer technology in the creation of an interactive effect, three-dimensional world, in which objects give the impression of spatial and physical presence. Huang et al., among others, point to the high cognitive values and meeting the emotional needs of the users while exploring the 3D virtual reality (2012).

Virtual tourism, by virtue of being an economically friendly form of consumption of tourist assets (Hu et al., 2012), may become an interesting alternative to travelling for poor people. Therefore, it is an interesting problem to determine the role of VT in the implementation of tourism needs of people from selected countries of Eastern Europe.

## **2. Research hypothesis and objectives of the work**

Below we present working hypotheses formulated for the purpose of this study, which were the basis for constructing the research tool:

H1: Virtual tourism, despite the high level of interest, is not used by the Polish and Belarusian users of social networking sites for the planning of individual tourism activity.

H2: In the absence of the need to involve financial resources, especially in the case of not too wealthy citizens of selected countries in Eastern Europe, VT may be an alternative to the actual tourist trips.

In connection with the above hypotheses, the specific objectives of the work have been laid out:

- Comparison of the level of knowledge of the phenomenon of virtual tourism by the Polish and Belarusian Internet users;
- Indication of the most popular tools and applications enabling virtual tourism according to the Internet users in Poland and Belarus;
- Indication of the main advantages and disadvantages of virtual tourism;
- Determination of the impact of the use of tools and applications enabling virtual tourism for the planning of own tourism activity by the Polish and Belarusian Internet users;
- Determination whether, in the case of poor citizens in Poland and Belarus, virtual tourism can become a substitute replacing the actual tourist activity.

The completed research was of a pilot character and its main aim was the practical verification of the research tool.

### **3. Research methods**

To achieve these specific objectives of the work the diagnostic survey method was used, based on an authorial questionnaire, composed of fourteen closed questions along with an imprint, aimed to develop the profiles of the respondents. The respondents were the users of the most popular social networking sites in Poland and Belarus.

The survey questionnaire (in the form of a Google document) in the Polish version was placed on the profile in the social network Facebook (fb). The choice of fb is justified by its high popularity among the Polish Internet users (<http://media2.pl/badania/102516-Megapanel-marzec-2013-Zyskuja-portale-traca-Facebook-i-YouTube.html>).

The Russian-language version of the questionnaire (also a Google Document) for the users from Belarus, was posted on the profile of the Russian counterpart of fb, namely the social network VKontakte, which is now the largest network of social networking and the most visited Web site in that country (<http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/BY>).

Surveys were distributed among the users of both services with the use of the, so-called, viral marketing.

196 responses were received, of which 150 correctly completed forms were selected for analysis, i.e., 75 questionnaires from Poland and 75 from Belarus.

The research was conducted in May and June 2013.

Due to the non-representativeness of the sample the results have been presented with the use of basic descriptive statistics.

## **4. Research results**

Profile of the respondent. Respondents from Poland are mostly women (62.6%), being in a relationship (55%), but without children, living in cities of from 101 to 500 thousand residents (63%), working professionally and receiving income below and within the limits of the national average (58.6%).

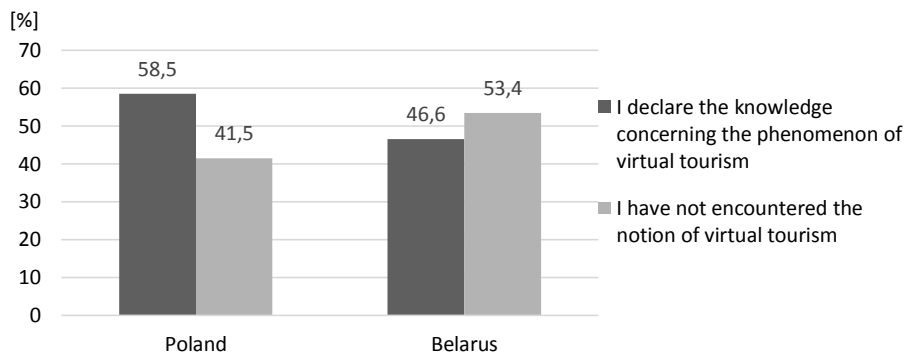
Dominated by people aged 21-30 years (42.5%), a smaller group consisted of respondents aged under 20 years (9.5%) and between 31 and 40 years of age (20%) as well as between 41 and 50 years of age (6.7%). Respondents aged over 51 years did not participate in the study. The respondents had mainly higher education (47%) or secondary (32%).

In turn, in the case of the respondents from Belarus, the majority of them were also female (52%), not in a relationship (54%) and without children. These individuals live mainly in cities of from 101 to 500 thousand residents (62%), work professionally and have an income within the national average (50%).

Respondents from Belarus, in the vast majority, were from 21 to 30 years old (71%), a smaller group consisted of persons aged under 20 years (8%) and aged 31-40 years (10%). As in the case of the survey in Poland, the study did not involve persons over 60 years of age.

Individuals who participated in the survey are active tourists, and in majority - 68% of respondents from Poland and 56% from Belarus - declare using online information sources before making a decision concerning the reception location. In the case of respondents from Poland these are respectively: Google Maps (46%), Tourist blogs (31%) and Facebook (23%). In turn, the Belarusians most often declared using the VKontakte social network (45%), travel blogs (40%) and Google Maps (15%). In the case of respondents from Poland, the primary source of information about the reception areas were Google Maps, and the Belarusians preferred the content shared in the VKontakte portal.

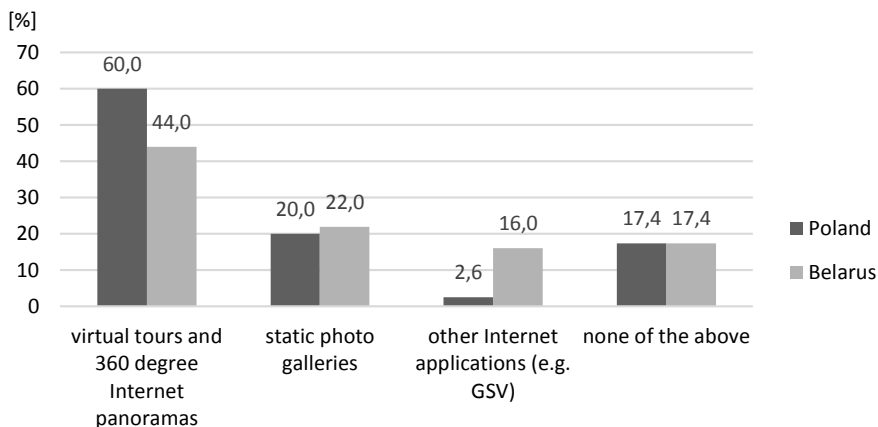
Virtual Tourism in the opinion of Polish and Belarusian social network users. The declared knowledge of the respondents concerning the phenomenon of virtual tourism is presented in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** Declared knowledge of virtual tourism according to Polish and Belarusian social network users (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

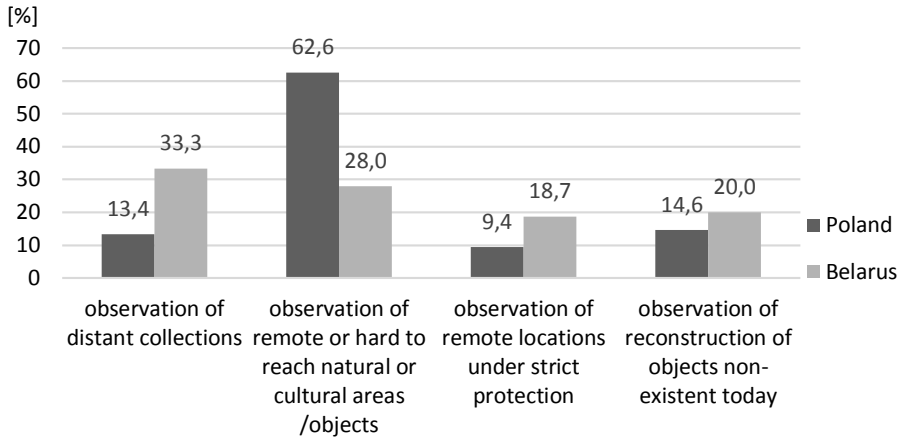
Knowledge concerning the phenomenon of virtual tourism was declared by nearly 58.5% of the respondents from Poland. In the case of people from Belarus the declarations of ignorance of VT were dominant. At the same time, people who identified themselves as using virtual tourism highlighted the most popular tools of virtual tourism (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Tools of virtual tourism used by Polish and Belarusian social network users (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

The most popular tools of virtual tourism among the respondents are virtual tours and panoramas watching online 360° panoramas. Slightly less popular were the galleries of static photographs. The GSV application was relatively popular among the respondents from Belarus (16%). It should be noted that some of the respondents, despite the knowledge of the phenomenon do not use the tools of virtual tourism. The most popular objects visited by the interviewed users of social networking sites virtually are presented in Fig. 3.

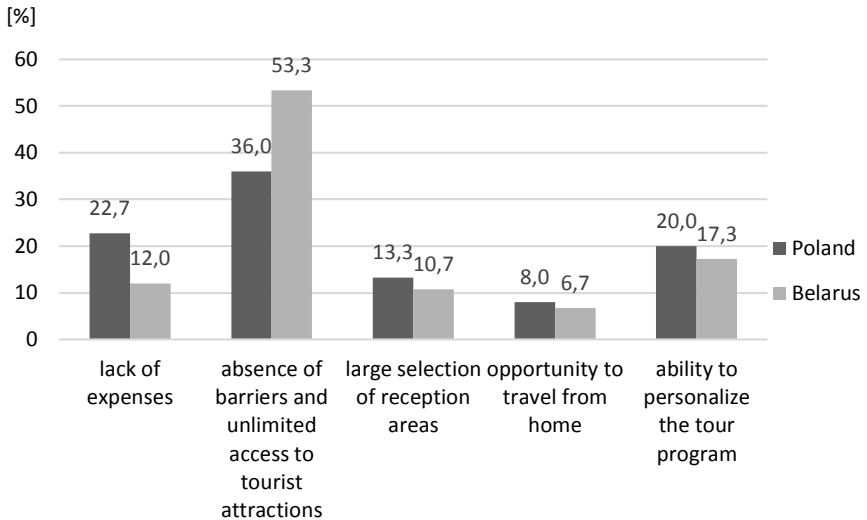


**Fig. 3.** Most often virtually visited tourist attractions according to Polish and Belarusian social network users (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

The interviewed Poles (62.6%) were primarily interested in the observation of areas difficult to reach for tourists (e.g., mountain peaks). To a lesser extent (13.4%) they are willing to watch museum exhibits, in the collections of distant museums, or watch the reconstructions of non-existent historical buildings (14.6%). The least popular are the virtual visits to places under strict protection (9.4%).

On the other hand, the respondents from Belarus were most interested in seeing the museum exhibits, in the collections of distant museums (33.3%) and hard to reach places associated with natural or cultural heritage (28%). The least popular among the respondents from Belarus were the reconstructions of non-existent historical buildings (20%) and the virtual journey to the places under strict protection (18.7%). The respondents also pointed to the major advantages of virtual tourism (Fig. 4).



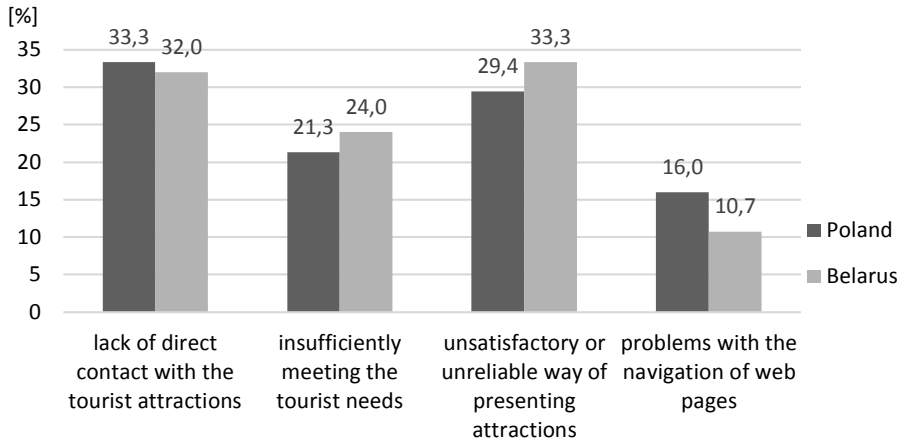
**Fig. 4.** Advantages of virtual tourism in the opinion of Polish and Belarusian social network users; tourist attractions (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

Both the Polish and Belarusian respondents indicated the main advantage of virtual tourism, i.e. the lack of barriers (e.g., architectural, communication, social) in the access to tourist attractions (respondents from Poland - 36% of respondents, from Belarus - 53.3%). Another advantage was the ability to personalize the tour program (respondents from Poland - 20%, respondents from Belarus - 17.3%) and lack of travel costs (respondents from Poland - 22.7%, respondents from Belarus - 12%). The least respondents indicated the possibility to travel without leaving home (respondents from Poland - 8%, respondents from Belarus - 6.7%).

Respondents also pointed out major disadvantages of virtual tourism (Fig. 5).



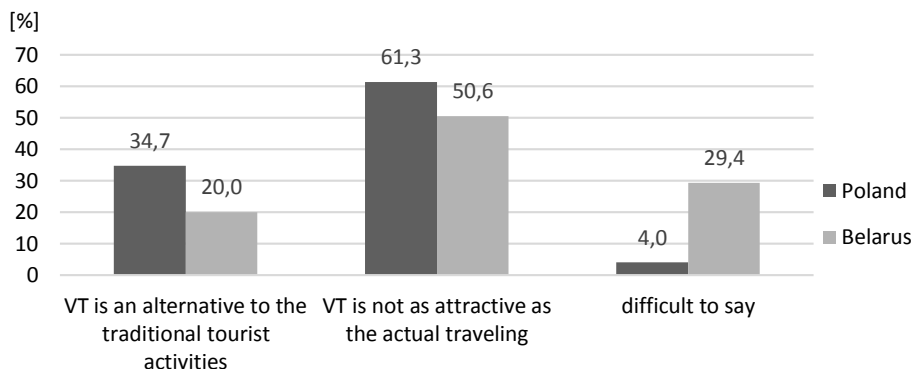


**Fig. 5.** Disadvantages of virtual tourism in the opinion of Polish and Belarusian social network users (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

Respondents believe that the main drawback of virtual tourism is the lack of direct contact with the attractions (respondents from Poland - 33.3%, respondents from Belarus - 32%) and unsatisfactory and unreliable way of presenting the attractions (respondents from Poland - 29.4%, respondents from Belarus - 33.3%). Another disadvantage is the insufficient satisfaction of tourist needs, e.g. emotional, cognitive (respondents from Poland - 21.3%, respondents from Belarus - 24%). The least respondents indicated the problems with the navigation of websites while exploring (respondents from Poland - 16%, respondents from Belarus - 10.7%).

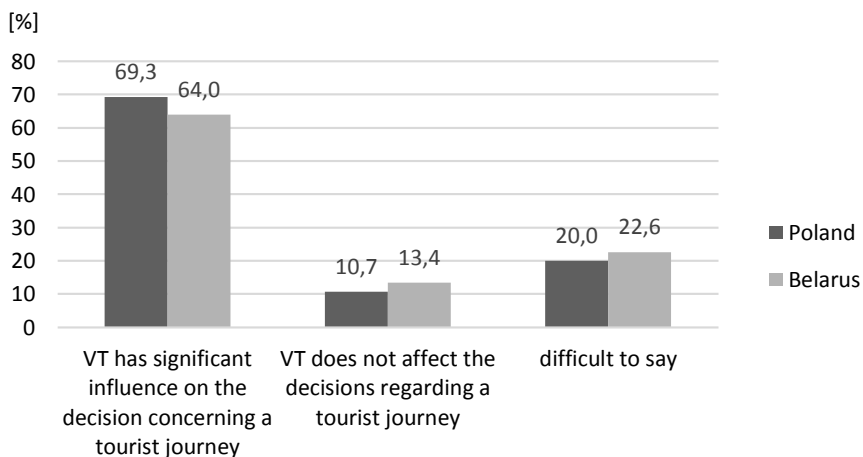
In the opinion of more than 61% respondents from Poland and slightly more than half from Belarus, virtual tourism does not constitute a real alternative to traditional travel and can only be a complementary activity (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.** The perception of virtual tourism as an alternative to traditional tourist travel in the opinion of Polish and Belarusian social network users (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

Nevertheless, the respondents confirmed the importance of VT for making the decision concerning a tourist journey. Both Polish and Belarusian users of social networking sites indicate a significant effect of VT on the decisions regarding a tourist journey (respondents from Poland - 69.3%, respondents from Belarus - 64%). Details are presented in Fig. 7.



**Fig. 7.** The impact of virtual tourism on the decisions regarding tourist travel in the opinion of Polish and Belarusian social network users (n=150), [%]

Source: own study.

## **5. Discussion of the results**

The results of the pilot studies show that the people who are active most frequently on social networking sites, and looking for information on tourist reception areas, are the educated, young, childless women who live in big cities. Similar results were obtained by The Nielsen Company (The state of media: The social media report), where the most active users of social networking sites were young American women. Similar results were also obtained by Maurer and Wiegmann (2011). In each of these examples, the most strongly represented group were people with higher education.

The source of tourist information, preferred by Polish users of social networking sites are the Google Maps, while the respondents from Belarus most frequently used the content shared in the VKontakte portal for this purpose.

Respondents from Poland, more frequently compared to the respondents from Belarus, declared the knowledge of VT and related technologies.

As one of the main advantages of VT, respondents indicated the lack of barriers in virtual travel and the opportunity to personalize the places visited, depending on the needs of the individual. Nevertheless, due to the lack of personal contact with the tourist attractions, this activity is not an alternative to actual travel. In the opinion of the respondents, it is the result of failure to fully satisfy travel needs (e.g., emotional, cognitive), resulting from the lack of personal contact with the attraction. Similar results were obtained by Dewailly (1999), who suggested that the virtual tourism is only complementary to the actual, physical consumption of tourist space and there is little likelihood of meeting the tourist needs through VT. This opinion has also been confirmed by Hu et al. (2012).

In the course of the study it was also found that VT is for the Polish and Belarusian users of social networking sites merely a source of information about the potential destination of a tourist trip. A similar view is presented by Yu (2013), who suggests that VT has a significant impact on the acquisition of tourist experience and helps to build a positive image of reception areas.

## **Conclusions**

The results of the study shows that:

- respondents from Poland, more often than their Belarusian colleagues declared the knowledge concerning the phenomenon and tools of virtual tourism;

- virtual tours and panoramas are the most commonly used technologies of virtual tourism by the respondents;
- the main advantage of VT is the possibility of unlimited consumption of tourist attractions contingent upon the individual tourist needs;
- the main disadvantage of VT is the lack of direct contact with the tourist attractions;
- VT is used by the respondents for planning individual tourist activities; however, in the case of half of the respondents, being persons with limited means, it is not an alternative to actual travel.
- due to the significant impact of VT on the selection of tourist destinations, the obtained results may be of application character, especially from the perspective of constructing marketing activities of travel agencies.

With this in mind, it is clear that in the light of the results of pilot studies, the designed research tool is correct, while the hypotheses H1 and H2 are most likely false, i.e. virtual tourism is probably used by the Polish and Belarusian users of social networking sites for the planning of individual tourism activity as well as it doesn't constitute the alternative to the real tourist trips. However, their actual verification will require appropriate detailed surveys requiring more extensive research sample in both countries.

The future research should be also focused on the problem of virtual tourism in the context of social media and tourism virtual communities formation and functioning on the example of EU and non EU countries.

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## **Wirtualne zwiedzanie w opinii użytkowników wybranych serwisów społecznościowych w Polsce i na Białorusi**

### **Abstract**

W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań związanych z analizą poziomu znajomości zjawiska wirtualnego zwiedzania (ang. *Virtual Tourism* - VT) i jego wykorzystania do planowania indywidualnej aktywności turystycznej przez respondentów z Polski i Białorusi. Przeanalizowano także możliwość zastąpienia przez VT rzeczywistych podróży turystycznych.

Respondentami (n=150) byli użytkownicy najpopularniejszego w Polsce serwisu społecznościowego Facebook oraz jego rosyjskojęzycznego odpowiednika - VKontakte. Narzędziem badawczym był autorski kwestionariusz ankiety, który dystrybuowano drogą marketingu wirusowego.

Uzyskane wyniki pozwalają na stwierdzenie, że VT służy respondentom do planowania indywidualnej aktywności turystycznej, jakkolwiek, nawet w przypadku osób niezamożnych, w większości przypadków nie stanowi alternatywy dla rzeczywistych podróży.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

wirtualne zwiedzanie, użytkownicy serwisów społecznościowych, Polska, Białoruś, aktywność turystyczna